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Macroresults through Microarrays

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The third enactment of Cambridge Healthtech Institute's *Macroresults through Microarrays* meeting was held in Boston (MA, USA) from 29 April–1 May 2002. The subtheme of this year's meeting was 'advancing drug discovery', a widely touted application for array technology.

The evolution of microarrays

If you were asked 'Who first conceived of the idea of microarrays', who would come to mind? Mark Schena perhaps, first author of the seminal 1995 paper on cDNA arrays [1]? Maybe Pat Brown, Schena's then supervisor? Or perhaps Stephen Fodor, the primary driver behind Affymetrix's (http://www.affymetrix.com) oligonucleotide-based platform [2]. Brits might even chant the name of Ed Southern [3]. Well, according to Roger Ekins (University College London Medical School; http://www.ucl.ac.uk/medicine/) all these answers would be wrong. It was in fact Ekins and his colleagues who first conceived of and patented 'a new generation of ultrasensitive, miniaturized assays for protein and DNA–RNA measurement based on the use of microarrays' in the mid 1980s [4]. The concept and potential of array technology was more fully described in a later publication, in which Ekins *et al.* [5] concluded that antibody microspots of ~50 μm^2 could be achieved, and that as many as 2 million different immunoassays could, in principle, be accommodated on a surface area of 1 cm^2.

Technological innovation

In practice, it took a different biological molecule (DNA), a different research group, and a leap into microfabrication technology to even begin approaching these kinds of densities [Affymetrix patent 6045996 talks of one million spots cm^{-2}]. Of course, advancing technology is one of the driving engines behind the genomics juggernaut, and we are already seeing '4th generation' machines for fabricating DNA chips. If the company representatives at this meeting are to be believed (and their cases seemed strong), spotting is out, and *in situ* fabrication of oligonucleotide-based 'iterative custom arrays' is in. Whether you go with the Combimatrix's (http://www.combimatrix.com) electrochemically directed synthesis and detection system, febit's (http://www.febit.com) Geniom® technology, or Nimblegen's (http://www.nimblegen.com) Maskless Array Synthesizer technology is a matter of personal choice. However, each of these machines provides the flexibility to design variable length oligonucleotide probes from sequences inputted by the user, and then perform *in situ* synthesis of an array. Each system also boasts unique advantages. For example, Combimatrix's biological array processor is a semiconductor coated with a 3D layer of porous material in which DNA, RNA, peptides or small molecules can be synthesized or immobilized within discrete test sites, while febit's Geniom One® is a fully integrated gene-expression analysis system with minimal user hands-on time – the probe sequences are programmed, the RNA samples inserted, and the gene expression data is pumped out a few hours later.

Cell- and tissue-based arrays

Array technology is in most people's minds firmly linked with gene-expression profiling. Fewer are aware that cell- and tissue-based arrays have been developed, and how they can provide a vital extra dimension to research. In support of this, Barry Bochner gave an update on the cell-based array system that Biolog (http://www.biolog.com) has produced for simultaneously measuring the effects of one gene in the cell under thousands of growth conditions (see [6] for further details). David Walt (Tufts University; http://www.tufts.edu/) is developing single live cell arrays using optical imaging fiber (OIF) technology. An array of microwells is fabricated on the face of an OIF at densities of up to 10 million wells cm^{-2}. Cells are then added to the wells and disperse at an average of one cell per well. Physiological and genetic responses of each cell are measured via fluorescence produced by reporter genes (e.g. *lacZ*, *gfp*. Assays performed so far include yeast live or dead cell assay, microenvironment pH and O_2 measurements, promotor responses using the *lacZ* and *phoA* reporter genes, and protein–protein interactions using the yeast two-hybrid system. The main advantage of this system is that the cells remain alive during the assay, which means a real-time timecourse can be performed and/or the array passed from sample to sample. This would be useful in, for example, the scanning of a combinatorial drug library for specific physiological effects.

Tissue arrays are a useful complementary technology to DNA arrays because they can be used to help validate and

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understand the biological and medical significance of gene changes discovered using standard DNA arrays. For example, an array of tumor tissues can be screened for the protein (using immunohistochemistry), message (using *in situ* hybridization) and copy number (using comparative genomic hybridization) of a gene of interest, to determine if expression of the gene (or lack thereof) is related in any way to survival. They can also be used to predict the probability of clinical failure of lead compounds as a result of toxicity by evaluating the distribution of the drug targets in normal tissue. Spyro Mousses and his co-workers at the National Human Genome Research Institute (http://www.nhgri.nih.gov/index.html) have built such arrays, including a multi-tumor array (~5000 specimens, and sections from 36 normal and 800 metastatic tissues) and a normal tissue array (76 tissue and 332 cell types).

The problem with proteins

It has been said that genomics tells us what might happen, transcriptomics indicates what should happen, and proteomics shows what is happening. The impact of functional proteomics on pharmaceutical R&D is rapidly increasing, and protein arrays are being used increasingly in both basic and applied research. Their use lies not only in comparative protein expression and interaction profiling, but also in diagnostics and drug discovery. However, an increasing number of researchers have found that protein arrays, like their cousins the DNA arrays, present several practical obstacles relating to their production and use. For example, in using *Escherichia coli* to produce recombinant eukaryotic proteins from a single expression vector, multiple protein products are often produced, suggesting mixes of truncated or otherwise altered proteins. There is also the obvious concern that the proteins might not be modified in a similar manner to eukaryotic systems. Also, an optimal method for depositing and binding proteins to the selected substrate is yet to be determined, as is the best way to ensure that they are bound in a correctly folded, active conformation.

Several companies have been addressing these problems. Prolinx (http://www.prolinxinc.com) is one such company, and Karin Hughes described their Versalinx™ chemistry for producing protein, peptide and small-molecule arrays. Versalinx™ uses solution-phase conjugation followed by immobilization, resulting in functional orientation of proteins and peptides on the substrate surface. It also offers the valuable additional benefit of exhibiting low non-specific binding. Sense Proteomic (http://www.senseproteomic.com) is also among those addressing these problems to develop robust protein arrays for drug discovery and clinical applications and has developed functional protein array formats based on specific disease tissues. Subtractive hybridization is used to identify genes with altered expression in breast tumor and cystic fibrosis compared to normal tissue. A high throughput cloning strategy (COVET™) is then used to produce libraries of genes that are tagged, cloned, expressed, purified and finally immobilized on glass slides. Initial validation studies have shown that the vast majority of the immobilized proteins do indeed retain biological function.

Stefan Schmidt and his company (GPC Biotech; http://www.gpcbiotech.de) have moved past the platform development stage and, with their focus firmly on drug discovery, are currently developing kinase-profiling arrays. Kinases are important targets for pharmaceutical drug discovery and therapy, and GPC's aim is to simultaneously detect multiple kinases, obtain activity profiles for different cell types, or analyze the ability of drug candidates to inhibit kinase activity. To do this, recombinant kinase substrates are immobilized on membranes, incubated with purified kinase, and the substrates measured for the degree of phosphorylation.

Summary

Meetings like this, packed with exciting discoveries and intriguing and interesting innovation, heavily emphasize the pace at which biotechnology is advancing, to the extent that the number of options for genomic and proteomic researchers can become overwhelming. Although data analysis is perhaps the greatest current concern for array users, an increasing challenge will be to determine the approaches and technology that really work, and to do it in a timely manner.

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